FIREFIGHTING AS A MANAGEMENT TOOL

Find and Correct Root Causes

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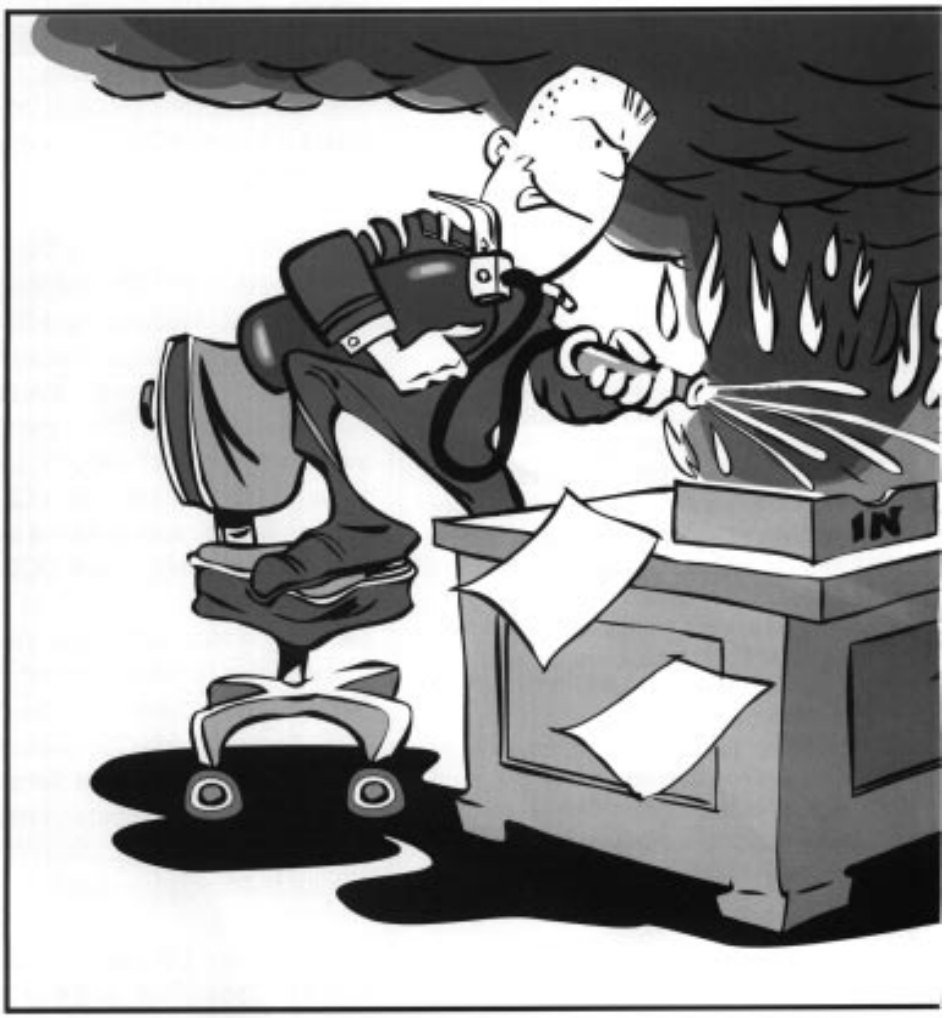
"I couldn't get anything done today; I spent the whole day putting out brush fires!" Most of us have heard this lament. Some of us may have said it. But, what are we *really* saying?

In most management circles, "firefighting" means taking actions to relieve an emergent situation. Those actions often are taken with little or no consideration for side effects. We often must use more resources than results can justify. We may have to assign a person we would rather use for more substantial work. Overtime may be needed to recover scheduling problems. Perhaps we are forced to pay a premium for materials, when a less-expensive alternative would be as good, if it were available.

At best, the term connotes the elevation of matters that should be routine to an urgent status. At worst, it implies that an unforeseen event is threatening our well-being and must be counteracted. In any case, the activity we have labeled "firefighting" usually is not one we think of as very effective and it certainly is not an efficient one. So, why do we do it?



Perhaps we don't understand what it takes to fight fires. In reality, firefighters wouldn't dare "firefight." Were you to pick up the phone, dial 911, and tell the person on the other end that your smoke detector went off and you think your house may be on fire, you would set into motion a series of actions that have been planned, tried, studied, drilled and drilled again. In virtually every fire department, people on the response team will have the advantage of training, planning and practice in responding to your call. In coming to your aid, the response team will take into account

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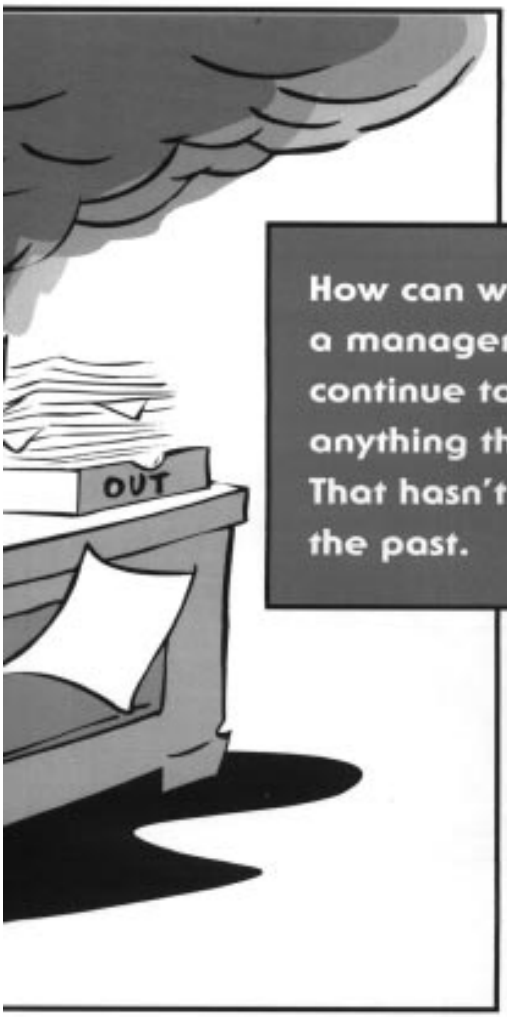
such diverse considerations as the weather, road and traffic conditions, hydrant locations and capacities, and the time of day. They will find out about the size and design of your house and its relationship to nearby buildings, its age and condition, shape of your driveway, and family members' physical conditions and limitations. They will be aware of department boundaries, politics, mutual-aid agreements, and standard operating procedures. There will be little resemblance to managerial firefighting.



How can we use firefighting as a management tool? We could continue to dump water on anything that looks like a fire. That hasn't been much help in the past.

Could another answer to our question be that we sometimes mistake our authority and responsibility for wisdom and judgment? Try to visualize: A veteran volunteer firefighter has responded alone with an ancient fire engine to a rural brush fire. The engine carries 500 gallons of water and a 750 gallon-per-minute pump. The fire, burning for some time, involves about two acres. Another engine and a tanker are mopping up a house fire at the other end of the district and will arrive to assist in about an hour. The volunteer surveys the fire, ignores an area burning brightly but which will burn itself out when reaching a road in its path, and begins using spritzes of water on a small front that can raise havoc if not controlled. About now a newly elected commissioner has a phone call from an irate citizen who ""wants that fire put out!" The commissioner arrives on the scene and orders the firefighter to turn the nozzle full force onto the "obviously" important fire. At the rate the volunteer is using the water, it could last for hours and control the fire. Should the commissioner prevail, simple arithmetic tells us our tank will be dry in a few seconds, and the fire will probably escape and spread.

Maybe we have been mislead into believing that in-depth learning is not important if people have on-the-job training, as in this scenario. The department buys a new engine capable of pumping 1,200 gallons of water per minute. An emergency budget crunch hits as we are about to send people to train at the manufacturer's school in another city. We decide to send only our training officer who will then train our personnel on the job. All goes well until three people respond to a major fire in a place where the fire main only can deliver 750 gallons per minute. How can we fault our training officer for not understanding and, thus, failing to teach that this pump can collapse a small main?

Then again, we may be under the false impression that pressure from above is the best way to overcome resistance. To return to our fire-department analogy, a five-gallon hand extinguisher used on the underside of burning shakes will be more effective than a large hose deluging them from the top. Like many organizations, should we firefight from above, without first finding the underlying hot spots, we will have to return to the same fire when it rekindles.

When things do go wrong, we always can stomp out the brush fire by assuring that the chain of command is held accountable. We can make sure that people in charge are aware and in control of subordinates' actions. Historically, when there has been an operational failure, an all too typical "corrective action" has been to require the attention of, or sometimes a signature from, a higher-level manager. This action, rather than correcting anything, removes the responsibility another step further away from the point where it actually can be fixed.

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A better approach probably is to learn from people knowing not only how to extinguish fires but how to prevent them. True firefighters always look for root causes and correct them. During the times when there are no fires, they work on improving conditions that prevent fires from breaking out. Successful firefighters are continually studying, planning, sharing information, and drilling.

It just might work!